CONSUMPTION IS THE INSTRUMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract

Russian and Western sociologists have noted the relevance of self-identification issues in times of crisis and worsening ethnic relations. The need for self-identification is a critical need for the person performing such functions in the life of man as self-actualization and psychological security and the ability to quickly adapt to changing conditions. The main mechanism of social identity is the individual's performance of certain social roles. Social instability leads to a blurring of the performance roles of this individual. Such a social vacuum is filled things and rituals

The practice life of man becoming the theater - asserts a well-known American sociologist Irving Goffman. Since in times of crisis man feels as an object that is affected by a process that he cannot control, then in the process of selection and consumption of things he can regain the status of the subject. The paper presents an attempt to analyze the positive and negative consequences of such scenario of individual self-identification as well as a role in these processes of modern communication.

Key words: *self-identification, crisis of self-identification, consumption, consumerism, market-oriented type of individual, social role, value orientations, advertizing*

Both Russian and Western sociologists, psychologists and philosophers consider the crisis of self-identification to be the essential issue of the day. Vladimir A. Yadov was the first to study the issue among Russian sociologists. He analyzed it in the context of the restructuring of Soviet society during the so-called “Perestroika” period. “However paradoxical it may seem, the destruction of conventional social identifications, every person in Russian society probably goes through, is akin to the processes which represent a cultural and historical transition from stagnant “traditional” society to the modern, i.e. dynamic, one. One can make a number of assumptions and go even further: there occurs a shift from Soviet-type social identifications which are crystal clear (“we are the people who open up prospects of brotherhood and working class solidarity for the world”) to “postmodern-type” group solidarities where positively everything is ambiguous, unstable, devoid of any vector referred to as social progress.” (Yadov, 1994:37)

The need for self-identification is a vital need of an individual. It serves as self-realization, psychological defence and the ability to adapt quickly to changing surroundings. Social self-identification as a self-assessment-through-group-affiliation process occurs through an individual's performance of certain social roles. Social instability results in inconsistent performance of these roles by an individual. Self-identification occurs at different levels: socio-professional, religious and ideological, national territorial, family and clan, gender.

The crisis of self-identification can be observed at any level, probably at a professional level to a lesser extent. However the case when a higher education professional works in a kiosk is still not uncommon, especially in the provinces. The clearest level of identification is the gender one; it is much more clear in terms of physiology than in terms of archetype. In modern society there is a growing trend towards gender role reversal in everyday life and unisex philosophy as the way of self-positioning in society. The identification by national identity shifts from the daily routine area to the field of abstract categorization, we all become members of a certain abstract generality “the Russian people”. Surely this is not true of national minorities. The change of ideological paradigms has led to growing identification with religious denominations. However at the level of religious values learning, e.g. knowing the commandments, the state of things is rather unpleasant in comparison with church

and service attendance rates. Family self-identification undergoes a certain crisis as well. Child upbringing becomes parents' competition on vanity more and more often. It is children's success and achievements rather than an absolute mother's and father's love for their child that become the criterion for assessing how good father and mother are at performing their social roles. The statement is irrelevant to dysfunctional families.

The societal crisis of the 1990s and the drastic change of values are not the only reasons for the crisis of self-identification; nowadays, when the generation that didn't have to reconsider its value orientations has grown up, the problem is still the essential issue of the day.

According to different authors globalization has played a crucial part in the emergence of a modern person's crisis of self-identification. Globalization processes mainly appear at the national territorial level of self-identification becoming a part of everyday routine. A great many of our compatriots have no idea where their children will live tomorrow and what language they will have to speak to their grandsons. Active migration that occurs worldwide results in the rise of nationalism that on no account should be interpreted as the search for identity. Things as symbols of national identity are not just a tribute to fashion (national flag hung out, national symbols clothing). Globalization has different aspects apart from the national one. Thus Galina M. Andreeva, a famous social psychologist, considers globalization impact on the process of self-identification from a historical point of view.

“In the context of coming globalization both the evaluation of an individual's past and his or her conception of the future identity take on particular importance. In this case “the past” is important in the sense that the existence of groups in the past and today can be easily compared due to collective memory. This comparison will allow, among other things, to decide whether the evaluation of “today” groups adapted to globalization gets more positive. It can also be of use to reveal how the attitude to the globalization process itself will be formed. As far as future identity forecasting is concerned, globalization sets a number of rather difficult tasks at this point. The difficulty is mainly to take into account (to forecast) the occurrence of new social groups, new rates and timekeeping models, probably specific habitat types. The following issue is especially complicated: the choice of identity by a new group with regard to global changes of situations and circumstances, including the change of significance level of emerging groups. The importance of a particular value aspect also cannot be understated: identity always goes hand in hand with adherence to a certain set of values. The hierarchy of identity groups chosen in the future becomes a challenging problem because of such characteristic of global society as multiculturalism: will the group that “I” have chosen retain its positive attribute in the future if while choosing I face the lack of information on what “the price” for the values I adhere to today will be in global society?” (Galina M. Andreeva, 2011).

Information processes occurring in modern society actually represent another aspect of the problem of globalization impact on the process of self-identification. As a result of the creation of a new information environment, traditional ways of social identification, like communication, role behaviour, are supplemented with other ones. For many young people socialization process literally takes place in front of a computer screen. Communication through social networks enables people to improvise the process of self-identification and to be whoever they imagine themselves in information space. At the same time mass media more often act as agents of socialization. Relatively new groups of social self-identification appear such as fans and anti-fans of a notorious reality show “Dom-2” (“House-2”).

At a boundary of XX – the XXI centuries the world entered into the information epoch. There are the main characteristics of it such as increase of a role of knowledge and information, development of "intellectual technologies", services sector development, first of all trade, finance, transport, science, education, rest, tourism and the change of social structure, increase in number of the layers of society occupied with intellectual work, life improvement of quality, emergence of the so-called post-material values connected with conservation, cultural wealth, etc. Information turned into the main resource of society, ability to work with information – in necessary professional skill. The institutes which function is production and information distribution play a huge role in modern societies - change the political, economic and social relations. Information civilization made information like the basic parameter.

But creation of information space which is the objective conditions of the formation of culture both all society and certain person is considered the most important. Character and intensity of the influence of information on world outlook and a way of life of the modern person demands studying and specification. Intensive change of information streams demands continuous updating of these images. Thus, the increase in a flow of information keeps to receiving it in the form of the grouped blocks – various theories, the advertising, news, it conducts to mosaicity of perception of a universe instead of consecutive information by the people

So what should be the basis for a modern person's self-identification?

When asked to introduce themselves without mentioning occupation or family status, most people have much trouble doing that.

Such social vacuum is filled with things and rituals. A person doesn't go to church and say prayers but prepares Easter cake and paschal eggs and feels the sense of belonging to certain socially approved groups. A woman doesn't feel that she measures up to the role of a good mother, but Sunday shopping and a full supermarket trolley demonstrate her care of the family and the children. Trying to find the answer to the question who he/she is a person starts to identify himself/herself with the things he/she possesses. This results in the emergence of such social phenomena as consumerism and overconsumption. According to the consumerism theory we have entered a new era – the era of consumption which enables people to satisfy all their material desires:

- increasing abundance of goods owing to which people can afford to spend more money on consumer goods, leisure and holiday activities than they used to;
- working hours reduction (since the early 20th century). More time is left for leisure and therefore for consumption as a form of leisure;
- owing to everyday life aestheticization people take more interest in their image and choosing a certain lifestyle;
- acts of consumption, keeping a certain lifestyle, the acquisition of certain goods are more often considered as the signs of a particular social position;
- the 19th and the first half of the 20th century saw social class, race or gender as the main sources of social identification; consumption models have replaced them from the late 20th century. In Russia society can be stratified on the basis of a car, namely its brand and model, a person owns as a car is an iconic thing in our country;
- consumers in consumer societies gain more power than producers, be they goods manufacturers or producers of services such as doctors, teachers or lawyers. To a certain extent, consumer's economic status substitutes for his/her political rights and obligations, i.e. consumer category substitutes for citizen category;
- more goods and services as well as personal experiences and aspects of everyday life take the form of goods, i.e. are put up for sale. A market affects all spheres of life, and shopping becomes a leisure activity.

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard in his book “The Consumer Society” (Baudrillard, 2006) suggested the hypothesis that society entered a new stage of its development which is mainly characterized by a new function consumption fulfils. Consumption has affected all spheres of life. First consumption growth leads to the formation of affluent society, then human activity becomes completely determined by consumption through “the nets of things”. Overall, consumption arranges everyday routine. As Baudrillard puts it, the fundamental problem of modern capitalism (i.e. of the late 1960s) is the contradiction between unrestricted productivity and the necessity to consume what has been produced. It becomes vital for the economy to control not only production but also demand, not only prices but also those who create demand, who are willing to pay these prices. Production controls market and demand, consumer sovereignty is a mere myth. A consumer is only free in the sense that freedom of choice is thrust on him/her. According to Baudrillard needs are not only determined by

production but a system of needs is the product of a production system. This makes a big difference since needs are not produced on account of specific objects but they are produced as consumer force existing within all productive forces.

Moreover, the consumer society becomes the instrument for the new forms of social control which determine the actions of an individual.

The problem of life orientations in the consumer society is widely covered in the works of American psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm (Fromm, 2004, 2007). He conducted research on two ways of human existence: being which implies that a person doesn't long to possess anything but is happy and feels unity with the world, and possession which implies that a consumer defines himself/herself as “I am what I possess and consume”. Considering the second way Fromm emphasizes how incompatible it is with the humanistic demands of human nature. Like other critics of the consumer society he dwells upon artificial needs thrust on an individual by production, his or her spiritual death as a result of overconsumption and profusion. According to Fromm consumption is one of possession forms which is seen as a cure-all in modern society. Many people believe that possession is the most natural way of human existence and even the only reasonable one. All this makes it difficult to comprehend the core of existence, to realize that possession is just one of possible life orientations. It is overemphasis on this life orientation that Erich Fromm comes out against.

Consumerism as the pursuit of acquisition and possession of certain things is not just a neurotic reaction of an individual who lacked parental love as a child. Such psychoanalytic rendition of this phenomenon is widespread. A number of groups can be singled out among those who consider things acquisition not as a forced necessity to satisfy their physiological needs but as the way of satisfying basic secondary needs: the safety need, the need for belonging to a social group, the need for social acceptance and even self-realization.

Brands devotees meet their need to possess things that symbolize status and success. “Armani Boy” or “Gucci Girl” implement consumer behaviour scenario which is aimed at being like others, at belonging to a certain group.

Another consumer behavior scenario is searching for things at a considerable discount to enjoy the satisfaction of saving money. Collecting money-off coupons and participation in promotional events make a person feel very smart and savvy and help to boost self-esteem. This person declares: “I know I'm not good at making money but I have a knack for saving money.”

One of the aims of self-identification is to be accepted by others. But as soon as a person gains acceptance, as a bonus he/she excites envy. This is part and parcel of possessing things and identifying oneself through things.

While analysing the consumer society of the 20th century Jean Baudrillard, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm point out an individual's estrangement from the essence of his/her existence which is creative labour. A man ceases being the measure of all things. A man is “substituted by” a thing, his/her social relations are determined by things. Simone de Beauvoir describes this phenomenon in the following way: “Accidentally stained clothes, a shred, an ill-cut dress, a bad perm – all these things are considered a misfortune much graver than a burnt roast or a broken vase; and that is because a flirt not only yields to the power of things but she wants to be taken as a thing, and she doesn't feel safe in the world without these things which act as intermediaries.” (Simone de Beauvoir, 1997:607)

Whereas basic or “existential” (as Erich Fromm puts it) needs are constant and few in number, many other needs arise in the consumer society. Society turns into the needs-producing society. Consumption becomes the way of, first, searching for identity and, second, imagining oneself.

The answer to the question “Who am I?” is tangible, it takes the form of things. Things acquisition becomes the key factor defining an individual's mental condition, as the need for personal development and self-realization can be fully satisfied in the course of this process. Consumption doesn't limit a person's self-realization but enables people to redesign their identity, to change it which accounts for “the infinity of consumption”.

Does the consumption process always represent the fictitious, distorted self-identification, and is the consumer society the result of estrangement, the road to nowhere, according to the discussed paradigm? In the Soviet period the imbalance between supply and demand accompanied by a shortage of goods gave rise to a certain model of consumption. Government institutions justified the shortage of things consumption from the point of view of ideology, giving priority to spiritual needs and condemning "consumerism" and "obsession with things". Striving for the satisfaction of material desires was criticized and defined as consumerism, obsession with things. The development of market relations facilitates the formation of a market-oriented type of personality. It is worth mentioning that a market-oriented type of personality has both advantages and disadvantages. Erich Fromm points out the following advantages: purposefulness, interpersonal skills, inquisitiveness, etc. Unscrupulousness, relativism, an unprincipled approach to choosing a means to an end are considered among drawbacks. (Fromm, 2007:312-313)

Value orientations of an individual are the essential factor in the formation of a certain consumption type. A distinction between terminal and instrumental values is of great importance. Terminal values refer to supreme meaning, they are valuable in themselves. Instrumental values embody models, means of achieving goals. Moral and spiritual values, which represent preferable schemes of personal relations and individual-society relations, are predominant.

Values and mindset priority determines the life project of "homo consumers". Labour and consumption are concepts of the same level but they are opposed to each other. Consumption as a terminal value is aimed at an individual. In this case consumption is a life orientation, the ultimate goal (even for the construction of symbols, the so-called "goal" is social position). Consumption as an instrumental value only is aimed at the world transformation as life orientation is reorganization, creation, application of essential powers, in other words cultural sociology considers consumption as the area of socialization and worldview formation. Therefore culture of consumption reveals life orientations, "the nucleus" of personality.

If a person's life purpose is buying a house where the whole family can gather, a cottage allowing the children to spend time in the open air, a car making it possible to travel freely and to be independent of travel agencies, what does this person acquire: family unity, fresh air, freedom or things?

Is it a distorted way of self-identification? After all, self-identification with a profession can be equally fictitious and distorted if a person works for money or status only. Sometimes such identification can result in a broken home or lost friends. The performance of family roles as certain status functions makes self-identification with a family a mere formality. Violent behaviour in church is the case of pseudo-religious self-identification.

If consumption is aimed at impressing others, at the need for acceptance, it doesn't make any difference whether self-identification occurs through work, things or children. However, if a person is self-sufficient, that is he/she has found his/her identity (I am that I am, and that is enough for me), values of a person that signify life purposes, not things, are the way of self-identification, and things can be the way of values materialization.

However the case when things are the way of making an impression is much more common. Erving Goffman, a well-known American sociologist and sociolinguist, claims that the practice of life of a person becomes theatre. Being the acknowledged master of micro-level interpretation, Goffman analyses face-to-face interactions of people in everyday life and theatrical performances they are involved in. Things play a crucial part in these performances. In his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" Goffman writes: "While in the presence of others an individual usually infuses his activity with signs which dramatically portray and highlight confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unnoticed or obscure. For the actions of an individual are significant only if during the interaction they express the same thing he/she wants to convey and bring home to others. On the other hand, every person stuck in daily routine sooner of later faces the situation when for the good of the cause it is necessary to concentrate and slightly fix (i.e. to manipulate) the impressions his actions make on others." (Goffman, 2000:202)

Recent years have seen the launch of various television programmes where a person, who has been

given a new outfit and a new look, or members of the family, whose apartment has been refurbished, are shown as individuals who have been offered not only new things but also the possibility for self-realization and new self-identification (the possibility of getting married, finding a new job, making friends). It is obvious that these TV shows are commercial and focus on the promotion of certain brands and goods. But they are so numerous that can be considered as a kind of social experiment. The results of such experiment are statistically significant but unfortunately we don't know what happens to the participants of these shows later on. One can reasonably suggest that life direction of most of these people has indeed changed, yet the reason for this is not the possession of things and symbols but a willingness to accept these changes. The mere fact of appearing on such programme and putting personal concerns on public display shows a willingness to identify oneself on a different level (unless it is the case of hysteroid accentuation of personality). Nevertheless, an audience of millions embraces the stereotype of consumption as the way to self-realization (or at least an incentive to it).

Restriction of consideration of a consumer society with technical aspects would be too big simplification as one is exposed to studying only external side. The essence of a consumer society consists in change of vital orientations. Orientation to expansion of borders of consumption becomes the compensation of insufficient realization in the sphere of professional activity. Characteristics of a consumer society involve the person in a constant and more and more being accelerated consumer race. At all external visibility of a choice, the consumer becomes dependent on the increasing and skillfully structured offer of goods and ways of their advance (imposing) by the seller by means of advertising and the untwisted brands.

In modern conditions, advertising is a factor which exerts influence on a course of public reproduction. The concept "advertising" became in recent years not only word often used and broadcast in mass media, but also the term causing quite certain circle of associations in economic, sociocultural, political and legal meanings. The range of influence of advertising information extends practically on all main forms of human activity and it allows to speak about the certain phenomenon of the advertising generated by modern society and became its indispensable attribute.

The beginning of the XXI century is characterized by the noticeable growth of names and circulations of various publications on problems of the advertising theory and practice. Today it is possible to speak about origin of various advertising schools: marketing, sociological, psychological, historiographic.

At present, the set of definitions of advertising collected. They can be distributed on numerous groups according to the main concepts which are conditionally divided into marketing - commercial, social - psychological (to a great extent answering to the modern concept of social marketing) and universal. Having analyzed the main functions and problems of advertising, it is possible to judge those important roles which it plays in the modern world: marketing, communication, economic, social, political, etc.

The system analysis of this difficult occurrence is necessary for the most effective use of this phenomenon in management of society. Definition of conceptual approaches is necessary for studying and understanding of essence of advertising: creative, psychological, communicative and socio-cultural approaches.

In limits of socio-cultural approach which considers advertising in all its manifestations and in concrete historical conditions of this society, it is possible to note that it at the same time can act both process of interaction of people and information process and process of their mutual influence at each other. Advertising in this context has one more important feature – it promotes transformation of the commercial relations in personal and at the same time emphasizes a material interest of authors of this process. Advertising communications, which transfers certain values and vital installations, also form public opinion both concerning advertised goods and services, and concerning the related requirements, aspirations, behavior stereotypes, thereby determining a way of life of the modern person.

Advertising as the communication form, transfers by information way and forms cultural stereotypes, examples of behavior which are transformed to the integral component of culture. Advertising

communications are capable to act as the instrument of preservation of national traditions and to transfer them to other generations, using signs, myths, and the symbols representing an image of the country. Thus, advertizing function on creation of consumer installations on the socio-cultural importance leaves far away from the economic sphere. The speech can go about new function – formations of lifestyle, distribution and promotion of values and vital installations that is possible only when forming public opinion on an occasion of standards and standards of behavior, and also – society integration on the basis of these standards and norms.

Thus, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the social and psychological emphasis on lifestyle of the potential and real consumer, which dominates in advertising, significantly increases effect from an advertising appeal by granting to the expert of advertising of the richest material about valuable orientations of people, motivation of their behavior, caused by their social status, level of material well-being and cultural development.

Identification of this function at advertising allows to characterize it as the social institute reproducing socio-cultural values and therefore acting as integration скрепой?! for society. However, it is necessary to make specification: this integration is carried out not on the basis of production, and on the basis of consumption.

Self-identification begins by identifying oneself on a spiritual level, the level of life values, terminal values, and if the consumption of things is congruent with this level, a thing can be an instrumental value. Or “a thing value”, which is the name of the latest IKEA project. .

The information space created in post-industrial society dictates new norms of regulation of mass communication.

Communication is a necessary condition of joint activity and, finally, a survival both in communities of animals and in human society. Forms of communication have not only changed in the course of cultural development, but also became a significant factor of cultural and social changes. The communicative technologies applied in various types of the social device, political systems are the characteristic of these societies. In totalitarian and authoritative societies the most widespread forms of communication are agitation and propaganda.

Advertizing and public relations are tool technologies of communication in liberal societies with market type of the economic relations. This type of societies also is characterized as society of mass consumption or mass society for which mass communications have a great importance.

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